

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 361 814

CS 508 326

AUTHOR Cooks, Leda M.
TITLE Educating Men and Women about Sexual Harassment: An Exercise for Trainers and Teachers.
PUB DATE Apr 93
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Joint Meeting of the Southern States Communication Association and the Central States Communication Association (Lexington, KY, April 14-18, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; Communication Skills; Feminism; Higher Education; *Interpersonal Communication; Organizational Climate; Organizational Communication; *Sex Bias; *Sexual Harassment; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Communication Strategies; Male Female Relationship; *Sexual Attitudes

ABSTRACT

Sexual harassment has proven to be a difficult topic for men and women to discuss openly. The articulation of such experience cannot occur unless both can communicate about the nature of differences and the constraints of culture; men and women must forgo the assumption that they are speaking from the same situated experience. Although several good video tapes designed to educate students about bias are available, additional techniques such as role playing and using narratives and discussion are needed to sensitize students to the power relations involved in harassment. To set the stage, sexual harassment needs to be defined and explained in specific terms. Students may then generate sexual harassment role plays or view a series of scenes compiled from different movies. Debriefing the two groups separately and then together allows members to react differently to the depictions of harassment. Given these considerations, sexual harassment may be explicated in a variety of ways depending on the particular setting in which the discussions occur. (NH)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

**Educating Men and Women About Sexual Harassment:
An Exercise for Trainers and Teachers**

Leda M. Cooks
School of Interpersonal Communication
Ohio University
Athens, Ohio 45701
(614) 593-9161

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official
OEI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

L. Cooks

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Presented at the joint Central/Southern States
Speech Communication Conference
Lexington, KN, April, 1993

Running Head: Sexual Harassment

Educating Men and Women About Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment has proven to be a difficult topic for men and women to discuss openly. One recent study, conducted by the Philadelphia Human Resources Planning Group, found that it was extremely difficult for men (and these are sensitive male human-resource types) even to sit down and discuss the issue. For the most part, men want to deny the existence of sexual harassment in the workplace (or any other environment) because they do not perceive it as a problem.

The position of women who experience and object to sexual harassment in the workplace is somewhat similar to the experience of African Americans in white firms. African Americans in white firms are often expected to experience white culture as whites do. Therefore they find little validation of their own (different) background and experiences of being the Other. "African-Americans feel whites are usually oblivious to and incapable of understanding the slights and discrimination they experience" (Knox, Akron Beacon-Journal, June 22, 1992). Much as white bias often goes unrecognized by the (dominant) white culture, so too does male experience become privileged as the "natural" order of things in the business environment.

For women, sexual harassment was not recognized as a violation of rights until the experience was named and given credence by other women in business and academic settings. For the African American woman, locating the experience of discrimination is even more difficult. Her experience of oppression is rooted in her experience both as a female and as an African American. The combination of sexism and racism that she

experiences often makes it difficult for her articulation and validation of self (Collins, 1990). Although her experiences are becoming increasingly visible and, thus, valid (as expressed in the writings of black feminist scholars such as Bunch, hooks, Lorde, Wallace¹), sexual harassment is often compounded by instances of racism. In a working environment sexual harassment by both black and white males is part of the environment; yet, harassment from black males is often more difficult to articulate given the current racial climate (King, 1992). Thus, her oppression as an African American is compounded by her experience as a woman in a patriarchal society.

Still, the similarity between the experiences of people of color and all women points to the notion that differences between men and women are cultural, which is precisely what gender theorists contend. Yet, if men and women (of every color) come from differing cultures, to learn to communicate with one another they must forego the assumption that they are speaking from the same situated experience. Locating the space from which the male white speaks is a starting point in the process of representing the (white) professional culture in this society. Ultimately, the definition and interpretation of sexual harassment is culturally and contextually determined.

Theories about why and how sexual harassment occurs serve little use if they are not situated in the lived experiences of women. Yet, the articulation of such experience cannot occur unless women and men can communicate about the nature of difference and the constraints of culture. Education about sexual harassment, then, should involve men and women in a dialogue about the privilege and boundaries of culture, and the nature of situated experience within this society.

Teaching about Sexual Harassment

Although sexual harassment in the workplace is an undeniable reality for women, men still need to be convinced both that the problem exists and is obvious. In the same Philadelphia study reported above, eighty-eight percent of the women said gender bias existed in their organizations, and ninety percent said that women encounter obstacles in the organization that men did not face. Although this sample was not representative of the entire population, it is evident that most men do not perceive sexual harassment to be a problem. I have found that the best way to introduce the topic is through a mediated discourse.

I believe strongly in the use of video to educate students about bias, and I do feel that there are several good videotapes available that have addressed the issue². However, I have often found that in the discussion that ensues, many of my male students remain unconvinced either that the issue is important or that certain behaviors can or should be classified as sexual harassment. Instead of becoming uncomfortable when students respond in this way, I have begun using several techniques to sensitize men (and some women who are caught up in victim blaming) to the power relations involved in harassment. I have used this technique effectively both in the classroom and in the corporate setting.

Through discussing harassment as shown on the videotape, individuals can psychologically distance themselves from their personal experience or involvement with the issue. Later, they begin to refer to themselves and their own stories in discussing the examples and their perception/definition of sexual harassment. I have found that video is

often the best way to introduce sensitive topics in the classroom and in workshops because typically the male participants feel threatened and get defensive without listening to what is being said. Role plays also serve a similar function, allowing individuals to process and discuss their reaction to an episode without direct confrontation. I have similarly used stories or harassment that the class has provided as impetus for discussion in individual groups. The groups then generate issues that are discussed by the class as a whole. My method of educating about harassment, then, involves the combined use of video, role plays, narrative and discussion.

Setting the Stage

The teacher/facilitator may wish first to define and explain sexual harassment early on in specific terms. Several typologies have been developed for this purpose (see, for example, Gruber, 1992). Usually, these typologies have been developed through content analysis of studies in organizational environments and from cases brought before the court. In the classroom or training setting typologies are useful for those who need a concrete definition to feel that a topic is worthwhile to study. The Gruber (1992) typology specifically outlines several types of harassment (e.g. sexual bribery, sexual advances, relational advances, subtle pressures/ advances, sexual categorical remarks, sexual assault, etc.). The use of categories, while helpful for some people, deflects attention from the underlying issues--for example, the distinction between sexual attraction and power-- that often are blurred in the business or academic setting where men and women are involved.

Creating and Showing the Scenarios

Teachers or trainers may wish to have students generate the sexual harassment role plays or scenarios as part of the exercise or to create them outside the class or training session. I have asked students to write down several of their own sexual harassment experiences, the circumstances surrounding the episode(s) and the consequences of the experience. Many times the women in the class will openly discuss their experiences, but the men are less willing to do so. Written examples insure anonymity and a larger response rate from both males and females. The stories may then be role played or read aloud, depending on the nature of the incident and the cohesiveness of the group. Students may also prefer to script and film scenarios for a videotape project. One administrator who used this exercise in training university administrators created her own scenarios using situations that she had herself encountered.

Teachers/trainers may also choose to generate scenarios by compiling a series of scenes from different movies. The scenarios can feature role plays between men and women in any business/professional or public setting where the exercise of power is involved. The context in which the harassment occurs should be clear to the audience (i.e. the relationship between the people involved, the time spent in this environment, etc.).

The teacher or trainer should introduce each scene or role play to set the context. The scenes or role plays should first be shown to male and female groups (separated according to sex). Ideally, the separated groups should have time to discuss what

occurred in each role play. Groups should then be brought together to discuss their interpretations and reactions what occurred and the context in which it occurred.

Without giving the groups a concrete definition of sexual harassment, the teacher should ask them what their gut (intuitive) reaction was to the scenarios. Several good questions for discussion are: In which cases did they think what was shown was sexual harassment? Which seemed to be harmless flirtation? Can flirtation in the workplace ever be harmless? Given the broader understanding of sexual harassment as sexual attraction plus power, what makes each scenario different for the two groups? How might women feel constrained in expressing or explaining their experiences to men--and even to other women?

Debriefing the Experience: Can We Identify Sexual Harassment?

The importance of this type of exercise lies in debriefing the two groups separately and then together. The males in the group often have very different reactions to the depictions of harassment depending on whom is being harassed. Male viewers interpret the episode as constraint or coercion when they watch and identify with the male in the powerless position. One male educator recognized a circumstance similar to one he had encountered during the role play. He had been required to assist a female teacher for his student teaching assignment his senior year of college. He was married and made the fact clear both to the teacher and to her elementary school class. He initially began to feel uncomfortable when the teacher would make comments about his appearance; she made suggestions about clothes she would like for him to wear and remarked several times that he looked especially good. The supervising teacher was

evaluating his performance as an educator and obviously held power over him. Although he initially had internalized the incident and felt guilty about what had happened, defining the episode as sexual harassment allowed him the opportunity to express anger and frustration about his own powerlessness. Although males may never totally reach an empathic understanding of female experiences of harassment, many have experienced oppression in various forms and under differing conditions. On any level, achieving some comprehension of another's experience, identity or differences demand moments of intersubjectivity.

For female viewers, the interpretations of the different scenes is often similar; sexual harassment is a reality for both men and women (although several cultural feminists may wish to disagree). Women in my classes have readily identified male experiences of powerlessness and oppression, yet males have a more difficult time identifying the constraining effects of harassing behavior on women. Once, a woman who had defined an episode with a male professor as sexual harassment had difficulty explaining why she thought her experience constituted sexual harassment. The professor had identified her in a written review as unstable and in need of support from others to succeed in a graduate program. Although she had managed to work full time in a minimum wage job while working toward her degree, her "stability" was questioned because she had not met the deadlines for completion imposed by the graduate committee. I told the story (without revealing her identity) before the group of females and then before the males. Each group interpreted the story in different ways. For the males, the concern with the fairness and equality of standards outweighed the particulars

of this woman's situation. The females in the group wanted more information on the way stability was to be interpreted in this instance. The rationality/irrationality duality that characterizes male, as opposed to female, behavior was foregrounded in this discussion. We began to discuss possible reasons why the "rationality" of female experience might be questioned in this instance. The object of this particular discussion, then, was not to determine the rightness or wrongness of either parties behavior, but on different ways of interpreting life experience.

For male participants in role playing or video exercises, identifying with the male being harassed often leads to a better understanding of the female who finds herself in a similar situation. The importance of the issue is particularly evident to those who can understand the ways in which abuse of power is damaging to the self. Categories are helpful, but a deeper understanding of sexual harassment by both men and women has to occur before the issue can be dealt with effectively in this society. The question here becomes, should and can feminist theory account for male experience? If women encounter oppression in this society in subtle and complex ways that are not always obvious to those unfamiliar with feminist principles, much less to those who are unsympathetic, is real dialogue about this experience an unrealistic expectation?

Discussion

Given the considerations outlined above, sexual harassment may be explicated in a variety of ways depending on the particular setting in which the discussion occurs. For instance, when I am dealing with the issue in a class about issues involving gender and communication, I usually present it as an outgrowth of the construction of difference

between men and women's communication. If women assert themselves and their intentions in a manner that differs from men, the difference is understood as weakness or acquiescence to male power. Still, beyond the recognition of difference, sexual harassment is fundamentally about the combination of sex and power. Yet, much of the literature on sexual harassment discusses control and power as key elements without ever really delving into issues of sexuality and sexual attraction. I believe that this is a mistake that often leads to victim blaming. If we continue to deny sexual attraction then women who are sexually attracted to the males they work with feel that they are to blame when an abuse of power occurs. Sexual attraction will always be present as long as men and women continue to work together.

The structures and system that maintain male dominance in this society create the conditions for sexual harassment to occur. Traditionally, the boundaries between the public (male) space and the private (female) space have been reinforced by the positioning of women who ventured out of their space as public property. As women have increasingly invaded the public space and demanded equal treatment the boundaries (once clear) have become increasingly blurred. Hegemony creates both the visibility and the invisibility of the male (white) professional culture. Male culture is visible because it represents public space in this society. Male culture is invisible precisely because it is so encompassing, and because those who wish to recognize the power of (white) male dominance will become increasingly visible and threatening through its representation. Where power was once evident it now has become difficult

to see. Where women have learned to play the game they find that the rules have again shifted.

Sexual harassment is hard to define and prosecute precisely because it involves power and sexual attraction in an environment where women and men are supposedly equal--but where women actually have less control than men. In the context of women's fight for equality, the assumption became that men and women could be equals if they had equal access to the same opportunities (Freedman, 1992). In the business and professional world the ability to compete assumes that there is an equal playing field to begin with. The preoccupation with the bottom line in the business world leaves many executives with little time or interest in the politics of power that actually may be hurting the productivity of their organizations.

As long as women are objectified in this society, sexual harassment will continue to be imposed on women. I usually tell my students that the conditions for harassment have been created through the positioning of women as objects, as possessions or commodities, as enemies to men and as threats to each other. As long as women allow themselves to be put on a pedestal, or to be treated differently due to their sex, this type of treatment will continue. I emphasize that sexual harassment is not new; however, the context has changed, and along with that context the changing face of power must be recognized.

Notes

- ¹ See, for example, E. Higgenbotham (1989). Beyond the sound of silence: Afro American women in history. Gender and History, 1(1), 50-67, bell hooks, (1984). Feminist Theory: From margin to center. Boston: South End Press, A. Lorde (1984). Sister outsider: Essays and speeches. Trumansberg, NY: Crossing Press, M. Wallace (1990). Invisibility blues: From pop to theory. London: Verso.
- ² The Lifetime Cable documentary on sexual harassment (Sexual Harassment 101) with Linda Ellerbee and Harry Hamlin is helpful, as is the video Sexual Harassment in the College Classroom.

References

- Collins, P.H. (1990). Black feminist thought. New York: Routledge.
- Freedman, E.B. (January 8, 1992). The manipulation of history at the Clarence Thomas hearings. The Chronicle of Higher Education, XXXVIII (#18), B2-B3.
- Gruber, J. (1992). Personal and environmental sexual harassment. Sex Roles, 26(11), 447-464.
- Knox, A. (June 22, 1992). Study finds it's difficult to get men to talk about gender bias. Akron Beacon-Journal.
- King, V. (1992). Manhandled black females. Nashville, TN: Winston-Derek Publishers, Inc.